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SUBJECT: FDP CHAIRMAN WESTERWELLE'S LITE AND DARK CAMPAIGN
PERFORMANCE

Classified By: DEPUTY POLITICAL SECTION CHIEF STAN OTTO FOR REASONS 1.4
(B) and (D)

SUMMARY

1. (U) Free Democratic Party (FDP) Chairman and Foreign Minister hopeful Guido Westerwelle used a September 7 political forum in Essen to criticize the poor quality of political discourse during Germany's election campaign. He stated that Germany deserved a higher quality debate about its future from the political parties. On Afghanistan, Westerwelle said the FDP would continue to support Germany's ISAF mandate but that the German government should withdraw its troops as soon as their mission was completed. Westerwelle also complained that the German media was excluding him from a TV duel between CDU Chancellor Angela Merkel and SPD Foreign Minister Frank Walter Steinmeier on September 13. End summary.

WESTERWELLE: LET'S GET SERIOUS

2. (U) In a speech crafted to highlight Westerwelle's political credentials in front of a senior and politically astute audience, Westerwelle could not resist the temptation to stray off topic and go into campaign mode. He made the case for Germany's smaller parties, such as the FDP, to be taken seriously by the German media, especially in an election year. He criticized the German media for focusing excessively on minor political scandals in its election campaign coverage. One infamous example was SPD Health Minister Ulla Schmidt's use of a government vehicle for her vacation in Spain. To make his point, he then criticized Schmidt not for her poor judgment but for her poor management of the Health Ministry and the sadstate of German health care, which "too frequently casts the elderly out onto the street." He received his strongest applause when he said that twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War he did not want socialists or communists in power in Germany. He said he was confident that a majority of Germans supported this opinion.

3. (U) Westerwelle also painted a bleak picture of the country's demographic challenges over the next twenty years -- a topic which he asserted was never seriously discussed by any senior German politician. He said that one of the principal challenges awaiting Germany was reinvigorating its education system. He called for greater investment of state resources in Germany's schools and universities. Addressing the economic crisis, Westerwelle refuted the notion that the policies of his pro-business FDP were responsible for Germany's economic malaise. He argued: "His party was not even in power so how could they be responsible?" According to Westerwelle, however, this false accusation is actually increasing the FDP's allure since the electorate is desperately seeking new economic and fiscal ideas designed to stimulate Germany's economy.

¶4. (U) Westerwelle did not raise Afghanistan during his speech, but during the question and answer session he was asked whether Afghanistan will become a major campaign issue over the next few weeks. Westerwelle responded that he hoped this would not happen and praised Foreign Minister Frank Walter Steinmeier (Social Democratic Party) for his unambiguous statements in support of Germany's ISAF mandate. He further noted that despite strong public opinion favoring an immediate withdrawal of German troops from Afghanistan, Germany has unfinished business in Afghanistan, especially in the area of police training. Westerwelle said: "If Germany does not stay the course then the Taliban would ultimately take over, thus making terrorist attacks around the world more likely, even in Germany." He criticized the government for its lackadaisical approach to police training and pledged improvements should his party enter government. The party's ultimate goal, however, is for German troops to leave Afghanistan as soon as possible but only once the mission had been completed.

COMMENT: WESTERWELLE, BOTH LITE AND DARK

¶5. (C) Westerwelle was in a jovial yet feisty mood as he took to the stage in front of a very large crowd of influential and senior political and business leaders from the Ruhr area, Germany's industrial heartland. During his prepared remarks, he brimmed with self-confidence. He played to the crowd with serious appeals and at the same time with

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funny stories, such as about an encounter he had with a Communist Party leader in Shanghai and an experience he had with a fellow airline passenger on a 6 a.m. flight. "Guido lite" was making a rare appearance, and the audience found him endearing. On the other hand, just as during his performance at the German Council on Foreign Relations on May 4, 2009, Westerwelle chided some questioners for their "slanted" and "mean" questions.

¶6. (C) This campaign performance illustrated a more general characteristic: Westerwelle becomes defensive very quickly and when challenged directly, especially by his counterpart political heavyweights, becomes aggressive and dismissive of other people's opinions. Like no other figure in German politics -- with the possible exception of the Left Party Chairman Oskar Lafontaine -- Westerwelle remains a polarizing political figure. Germans either love him or hate him. End Comment.
Murphy